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Men and *Matelotage*: Sexuality and Same-Sex Relationships within Homosocial Structures in
the Golden Age of Piracy, 1640-1720

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For decades, B. R. Burg's *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition* has served as the centerpiece that defined the historiography of piracy and sexuality. His claim that homosexual contact was "the ordinary form of sexual expression" among pirates has been met with derisive criticism on the grounds that the suspension of disbelief between his sources and conclusions are too great to overcome.¹ The cheeky nature of his research, made clear in its title, has become the subject of scrutiny while simultaneously opening new avenues of discourse in the discussion of pirates and sexuality. Burg's research has helped historians conceptualize how pirates acted versus how they have been depicted over the course of several centuries by challenging the hyper-masculine heteronormative narrative of pirates. This research will attempt to define the contours of same-sex bonding and relationships within the homosocial structure of a pirate ship, meanwhile it negates Burg's assertion that these relationships were all inherently sexual as there is little evidence to argue in the affirmative.

There are, however, case studies that point to the reality of same-sex coupling as a lesser known subculture of pirate society with both platonic and sexual implications for the men involved. This includes instances of situational homosexuality and *matelotage* which do not conclusively define the sexuality of early pirates as much as it describes the conditions that allowed men to enter into more meaningful, emotional relationships with one another. Companionship became especially important to these men as the nature of piracy invited extreme physical risks and cruel living conditions. Having a partner, sexual or not, allowed pirates to weather difficult living conditions. Sexual contact was a byproduct of these relationships rather than a foundation since sodomy was considered largely taboo by English culture which bled prejudice into pirate culture. The absence of anti-homosexual language is to be expected from the legal records and ship articles of the era considering the term "homosexual" did not exist at

¹ Barry Richard Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), xl.

the time and is most often replaced with “sodomy” or “buggery” to describe the crime of male-to-male penetration. To remedy this semantic issue, historians have relied on coded language in literature, litigation documents and ship articles that require readers to speculate to an extent, but remain rooted in evidence nonetheless. In doing so, this thesis challenges the argument that all same-sex relationships in a homosocial order were inherently sexual and instead suggests that these types of sexual relationships were relegated to a subculture of pirate society due to an intolerance of homosexuality both at sea and on land.

The first indication that homosexual contact occurred among pirates was the homosocial structure of the ship’s crew combined with evidence of similar contact occurring among young men on other seventeenth century marine vessels. Particularly on English naval vessels, Burg argues that men who joined the Royal Navy as volunteers, as well as impressed vagrants, vagabonds, and boys, may have been conditioned “to accept homosexual practices and ultimately to prefer them” due to the sheer volume of same-sex socialization.² The conditioning of young men was made easier by the fact that they were naive and impressionable (in both senses of the term), and came from the lower echelons of society and thus more open to homosexual acts through socialization.³ However, this line of reasoning suggests that homosexuality was transmitted like a contagion or a result of predatory child grooming. Burg uses the evidence of a rapid swell of men enrolled in the Royal Navy between the years 1688 and 1697 from 15,000 men to 40,000 men to point to the fact that the sheer volume of sailors living in tight quarters meant that homosexual contact was “unavoidable,” and that some men “must have surely succumbed to the prevailing sexual practices” which led to an increase in the amount of situational homosexuality.⁴ This argument, requiring a healthy dose of speculation, only

² Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 53.

³ Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 61.

⁴ Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 62.

describes conditions that were conducive to homosexual contact but does not guarantee that such acts happened, or even that they were prevailing. There is no question that the Royal Navy has carried a reputation of same-sex contact, as noted by Winston Churchill's infamous "rum, buggery and the lash" remark, but sodomy still carried legal penalty during this time and was by no means openly endorsed by navy sailors.⁵ While there may be some truth in Burg's claim that there was a rise of incidental homosexual encounters, it is a farcry from proving almost universal homosexuality, especially with limited circumstantial evidence. Burg suggests that many of these early, sexually progressive pirates shaped the culture of Caribbean buccaneers. Despite the fact that buccaneers were on the decline during Burg's analysis of increased naval enrollment, buccaneers did in fact practice a culturally distinct institutions of same-sex activity compared to the Royal Navy, though the navy's influence is likely minimal.⁶

Buccaneers, based in the Caribbean islands, engaged in a form of civil union called *matelotage* which has been debated by scholars as either a form of a last will and testament between two men, or as a union that some scholars have likened to gay marriage. In its original stated purpose, French buccaneer Alexandre Exquemelin described *matelotage* as a "general and solemn custom... to seek out for a comrade or companion" in order to join the two men's assets and possessions "towards a mutual and reciprocal gain."⁷ With this definition, it would be premature to state that the purpose of *matelotage* agreements were predicated on sexual gratification rather than on social needs. These arrangements were confirmed through verbal agreements or through notarized, written articles. While Exquemelin describes this institution as unique to his experience with Caribbean buccaneers, the institution permeated pirate culture on a transnational level. One particular written *matelotage* agreement between two men, Francis

⁵ Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), viii.

⁶ Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 60.

⁷ Alexandre Exquemelin, *The buccaneers of America* (London: S. Sonnenschein & Co., 1893), 40.

Hood and John Beavis, was written and signed at Fort Dauphin, Madagascar, and designates that “what gold, silver, or any other thing” will go to the surviving man should the other die at sea.⁸

Written *matelotage* agreements are extremely rare and while this one does not reveal the nature of the two men’s relationship, it does support the argument that these arrangements served as a risk-sharing contract that had an economic benefit. Moreover, Exquemelin acknowledged the role of wives in these contracts.

While Hood and Beavis do not mention wives, Exquemelin noted that “others, if they be married, leave their estates to their wives and children; others to other relations,” creating room for heterosexual relationships to exist within *matelotage* agreements.⁹ In his book, *The Invisible Hook: The Economics of Pirate Tolerance*, Peter Leeson uses this space to argue that *matelotage* could not be a homosexual institution due to the “bequeathing [of] property to a dead buccaneer’s wife.”¹⁰ However, it is hasty to conclude that this heteronormative version of events negates the argument that some *matelotage* agreements could have a sexual element. Just as *matelotage* provided an economic risk-sharing factor, it also served to negotiate the emotional needs of pirates as a source of companionship in difficult living conditions.

While Leeson is correct in his statement that *matelotage* was an economic insurance policy, the level of shared risk is precisely what enabled pirates to seek companionship with one another on an emotional level. An example of companionship that transcended class and race is the case of Olaudah Equiano and Richard Baker. As a former slave, Equiano sought comfort in those who shared his troubled experiences and despite Baker’s status as a slave-owning white American, they grew “extremely fond” of one another as they were both teenagers living at sea

⁸ Francis Hood and John Beavis, “Agreement between Francis Hood and John Beavis, 10 March, 1699.”

⁹ Exquemelin, *The buccaneers of America*, 40.

¹⁰ Peter Leeson, “Equal Pay for Equal Prey The Economics of Pirate Tolerance,” in *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates*, (New Jersey: Princeton Press University, 2009), 174.

at the time.¹¹ For two years, Baker and Equiano had an informal *matelotage* arrangement, often sharing the same bed space and confiding in one another with personal troubles. Equiano wrote that the two were “inseparable,” and experienced “many sufferings together on shipboard” and would then spend the nights “lain in each other's bosoms [during times of] great distress.”¹²

While nowhere in Equiano's journal does he indicate any sexual contact beyond the physicality already described, this case serves as an example of the conditions that allowed men to engage in meaningful same-sex relationships with one another. *Matelotage* by definition is sex-less but in practice, could have been more. The institution could “combine friendship, brotherly love, servitude, and perhaps even sex,” all determined on a case-by-case basis.¹³ Equiano and Baker's relationship is meant to contradict Leeson's assertion that *matelotage* was strictly contractual since pirates had complex, intimate relationships with one another and it is incorrect to exclude any of the possibilities.

Leeson does not reject the idea of homosexual pirates altogether, even mentioning that “it's possible pirates used the façade of heterosexuality to mask hidden homosexual desires,” but he also dismisses the coded language of a particular set of ship articles to defend his claim.¹⁴ Finding explicitly anti or pro-homosexual language in seventeenth century documents is extremely difficult, if not near impossible, meaning that historians rely on context and tacit confirmations of homosexual activity; with this in mind, a strong hint at the presence of homosexual tendencies on pirate ships comes from the articles of Bartholomew Roberts.

Roberts included a code in his ship's articles to potentially hamper sexual promiscuity which insinuated that homosexual activities were rampant enough to warrant such a clause. The

¹¹ Olaudah Equiano, *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano: or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London: T. Wilkins, 1789), 98.

¹² Equiano, *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano*, 98.

¹³ Christopher Miller, “Edouard Corbiere, “Mating,” and Maritime Adventure,” in *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 309.

¹⁴ Leeson, “Equal Pay for Equal Prey The Economics of Pirate Tolerance,” 172.

article states that “No boy or woman be allowed amongst [the crew]” and goes on to describe that “if any man were to be found seducing any of the latter sex, and carried her to sea, disguised, he was to suffer death.”¹⁵ Admittedly, the language of this code is incredibly vague, but the inclusion of “boys” in an article about seduction and potential sexual partners is noteworthy. Historian Edward Fox suggests that this clause was created to preserve the masculine identity of the homosocial pirate ship. Women and boys potentially disrupted the “manliness of the company” with their effeminate influence, an argument Fox proposes in order to reframe the article as a “manly men only” clause.¹⁶ Only those who could pull their own weight were allowed on board due to the finite amount of space, food, and other resources.

As the only existing article that addresses boys in pirates companies in this light, which may not be a comment on sex at all, it does not support the thesis that widespread homosexual activity occurred. The lack of similar articles suggests that the pervasiveness of sodomy was not widespread enough to warrant attention, or that it *was* prevalent, but kept secret and behind closed doors which remains unlikely since seamen lived in such close quarters. In the same vein, the argument can also be made that homosexual contact was prevalent and thoroughly accepted, however, legal prejudice against sodomites likely informed the prejudices of these companies.

The entirety of this temporal analysis takes place within the range of 1533 to 1861, a time frame where English legislation allowed for sodomites to be executed by death. Sodomy and buggery, used almost interchangeably in literature and court documents, was made a crime in England in 1533 through the aptly named “Buggery Act.”¹⁷ Burg contests that legislators were not keen on punishing sodomites to the fullest extent of the law because of its status as a *civil*

¹⁵ Edward T. Fox, “Piratical Schemes and Contracts’: Pirate Articles and their Society, 1660-1730” (PhD diss. Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter, 2013), 233.

¹⁶ Fox, “Piratical Schemes and Contracts,” 233.

¹⁷ Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 5.

crime, meaning that it posed little to no threat to the greater society. Burg even states that capital punishment was reserved specifically for felonies and that the lack of harsh punishment veiled an implicit acceptance of homosexuality by legislators and the public.¹⁸ If that were true, legislators would take a more relaxed approach to what punishments were prescribed as appropriate for sodomites, yet legislators defended the use of capital punishment. In 1549, the House of Commons saw a motion that proposed buggery be charged as a felony rather than a civil crime which would have guaranteed a death sentence for all men charged with crime.¹⁹ To state that legislators universally downplayed the gravity of sodomy charges cannot hold true in the face of a bill that actively pushed for the most severe form of punishment against sodomites.

The longevity of this prejudice carried into the formation of colonial America as shown by Pennsylvania's Act Against Sodomy and Buggery being introduced into legislation in 1704.²⁰ Enacted by John Evans, the "Queen's Royal Approbation Lieutenant Governor" under William Penn, the act subjected both men and women convicted of buggery to lifelong hard labor, whippings, and divorces were issued in the case that the convicted party was married.²¹ While the act reveals a pattern of sodomy present in society over multiple centuries, the retaliation against said sodomites supports the argument that it was neither a prevalent nor widely accepted practice and thus, pirates likely translated this bias within pirate society.

Moreover, Burg betrays his own argument by using evidence that revealed how English pirates were intolerant of homosexual acts with the example of Edmund Cook. Cook's fellow seamen levelled the accusation of sodomy against him in order to discredit his authority in an internal power struggle.²² Coincidentally, Cook was a member of Bartholomew Roberts'

¹⁸ Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 3.

¹⁹ "House of Commons Journal Volume 1: 13 March 1549," in *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 1, 1547-1629*, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1802), 10.

²⁰ "An Act Against Sodomy and Buggery," [Legislation, The National Archives, Kew, CO].

²¹ Ibid.

²² Fox, "Piratical Schemes and Contracts," 233; Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 148.

company, and the fact that his crewmates believed that exposing him as a sodomite would forfeit his claim to power shows their negative attitudes towards sodomy, especially in light of the ‘no boys’ article. This level of persecution certainly does not reflect the attitude of a homosocial community who saw no fault in sodomy. It is not known whether this indiscretion is what ultimately cost Cook a position of power, but the animosity he faced at the hands of his own shipmates reveals a general intolerance of homosexual activity on board, possibly as an extension of the English legal system’s intolerance.

While English attitudes were more negative towards sodomites, several documents suggest that French pirates were more accepting of homosexuality which aided the establishment of homosexual activity as a subculture of piracy. Cultural prejudices regarding sodomy and homosexuality translated from land to sea, which both Fox and Jessica Floyd discuss in their research. Fox contested that pirates did not enjoy unparalleled freedoms, but rather “imposed upon themselves social controls and restrictions that in all significant respects followed, and sometimes exceeded, those found in legitimate society.”²³ Fox points to the ‘no boys and women’ article to first negate the idea that homosexuality and situational homosexuality would be accepted due to the restriction of heterosexual relations, and secondly, to suggest that pirates’ articles adhered to regular society’s standards and punishments in this application.²⁴

Execution as punishment for both homosexual and heterosexual relations on Roberts’ ship is an example of a reflection of England’s penal codes implemented on a pirate ship, and done exceedingly so. While this does not reflect the attitudes of all pirate companies, the negotiation of same-sex relationships existed on all pirate ships with differing levels of pre-informed prejudice.

²³ Fox, “Piratical Schemes and Contracts,” 303.

²⁴ Fox, “Piratical Schemes and Contracts,” 303.

Jessica Floyd highlights this issue in her review of Marcus Rediker's *Outlaws of the Atlantic*, which primes the conversation of prejudice towards sexuality as a culturally endorsed value that impacted the manifestation of same-sex bonding and homosexual relationships among pirates. Floyd notes that in *Outlaws*, Rediker places an importance on training the historical spyglass on building narratives from the bottom up, allowing the nuanced approaches of pirates grappling with uncertainties, risks, and power dynamics to come through as they combatted restrictions imposed by themselves and society at large.²⁵ While Floyd commends Rediker's framing of the ship as a stage for radical transformation, this research has shown its conservative nature when it comes to same-sex relationships and homosexuality. Floyd attempts to retrain the spyglass on the relationships of sailors, questioning how they might have negotiated companionship, love, and even sex in the homosocial environment of a ship.²⁶

These negotiations were possibly informed by the cultural stigmas surrounding sexuality from the pirate's mother country with evidence pointing to a correlation between French pirates and a greater acceptance of same-sex bonding. While Peter Leeson pointed out that *matelotage* served as an economic insurance policy rather than an intimate union, the language of Exquemelin's account confines the practice to a French custom. In Exquemelin's description of buccaneers and *matelotage*, he states that he is discussing a specific population "who inhabit a great part of this island," those from the "French nation."²⁷ While *matelotage* did not only apply to French men, this comment is interesting given the fact that the contract between *matelots* Francis Hood and John Beavis was notarized in Fort Dauphin, Madagascar which was a French settlement.²⁸

²⁵ Jessica Floyd, "Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic*," review of *Outlaws of the Atlantic*, by Marcus Rediker, Hyperhizz, 2015.

²⁶ Floyd, "Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic*."

²⁷ Exquemelin, *The buccaneers of America*, 40.

²⁸ Francis Hood and John Beavis, "Agreement between Francis Hood and John Beavis, 10 March, 1699."

As for France's legal opinion, sodomy and homosexuality warranted punishments up to death with the last known sodomite execution taking place in 1750.²⁹ In 1791, sodomy was decriminalized as a result of the French Penal Code which was not due to a radical, widespread acceptance of homosexuality, but rather in a shift of political philosophy which interfered less with people's personal affairs.³⁰ As a result, France saw a national uptick in publicized eroticism in art and literature. Given the tumultuous nature of the French Revolution, political priorities shifted, allowing homosexuality to thrive in covert cohorts. While the passage of this code does not translate into the previously discussed relationships of buccaneers and other Golden Age pirates, it has aided in the publication of sexually progressive literature which provides a retrospective glimpse into homosexuality as a subculture of piracy.

Shifting attention to literary pirates as opposed to historical pirates, the homoerotic representations of effeminate and hypermasculine sailors in European literature helps define the attitudes that relegated homosexuality to a clandestine facet of pirate culture. The warping depictions of Blackbeard in literature serve to prove this case as he is described as a violent, heterosexual cuckold and voyeur in Charles Johnson's 1724 *A General History of Pyrates*, then later as a "hairy Hugh Hefner" type with a new found respect for women in a 1974 biography, *Blackbeard the Pirate*.³¹ The older interpretation of Blackbeard allowed for sexual interactions between men, even as a passive participant, to be freely discussed whereas the later interpretation maintains the heterocentric narrative of masculine pirates such as Blackbeard. However, Hans Turley notes in his analysis of *A General History* that Johnson spends significant time reaffirming the reader that renowned female pirates who disguised themselves as men, Ann

²⁹ Serena Johnson, "Sodomy Laws in France: How The 1791 French Penal Code Decriminalized Sodomy Without The Will of The People," 6.

³⁰ Johnson, "Sodomy Laws in France," 19.

³¹ Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*, 6.

Bonny and Mary Read, are in fact women which highlighted an “anxiety created by an absent heterocentric foundation” which was strong enough for Johnson to retroactively categorize Bonny and Read into unmistakably female roles.³² The gendering of Bonny and Read in addition to the sanitization of Blackbeard’s sexual relationships are only a few instances of how homoeroticism has been routinely scrubbed from the historiography of pirates, thus, seen as a taboo that was consigned to a secretive, subculture of piracy.

Fortunately, literature in the nineteenth century realigns pirates, specifically buccaneers, with homosexual contact as a feature of piracy. Historian Christopher Miller uses Édouard Corbière’s 1832 novel, *Le Négrier*, to invoke explicitly homosexual relationships among sailors. As a former French Navy sailor and slave trader, Corbière’s unique experience allowed him to discuss the intricacies of same-sex relationships at sea in what Miller describes as a “very queer picture of pirate life.”³³ *Le Négrier* reads as a sailor’s personal diary, written by a young man named Léonard who experiences *matelotage* and witnesses homosexual relationships with other men on board. In it, *matelots* are described in a way that recalls the relationship between Olaudah Equiano and Richard Baker, intimate without requiring sex, in addition to *matelots* who engaged in gay sex, sometimes while wearing “silk dresses” during the Caribbean chapter of the novel.³⁴ Corbière grapples with sexuality and gender throughout the novel, often insinuating that cross-dressing pirates had a proclivity towards sexual deviance in their relations with both men and women without assigning any shame on these actors. Miller describes Corbière’s discourse as “precocious” in its attempt to explore the emotional angle of homosexuality before the term homosexual even existed.³⁵

³² Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*, 101.

³³ Miller, “Edouard Corbiere, “Mating,” and Maritime Adventure,” 307.

³⁴ Miller, “Edouard Corbiere, “Mating,” and Maritime Adventure,” 307.

³⁵ Miller, “Edouard Corbiere, “Mating,” and Maritime Adventure,” 311.

However, it is important to note that even the written possibility of love between men as a regular, acceptable occurrence is groundbreaking for its time. Corbière's novel points directly towards a homosexual subculture of piracy with flexible rules surrounding gender and *matelotage*.³⁶ As a later piece of literature compared to the timing of Golden Age pirates, it is premature to state that this novel should be viewed as any mounting evidence of widespread homosexuality. As Miller notes, "men experiencing love or sex with each other on the high seas was not "liberation" or the embracing of a suppressed identity; it was simply a fact."³⁷ Therefore, translating the relationships of Corbière pirates onto Golden Age pirates is nearly impossible since there is no organized expression of homosexuality in either timeline to compare. These anecdotal examples certainly guide the historical discourse, but the fact remains that *Le Négrier* is a fictional novel and historians are left with little to no evidence that any of the events in *Le Négrier* were anything but anomalies. The silver lining of this novel is that it opened the possibilities of same-sex relationships in homosocial orders to function as a viable practice and according to previous research, offered substantial interpersonal and economic benefits.

Men entered into relationships with one another for a variety of reasons and the nature of those relationships differed significantly, but enough is known to conclude that Burg's construction of an overtly homosexual social strata is flawed. There is no doubt that men engaged in sex with other men given the evidence of backlash in the form of legal codes and articles, but culturally promulgated intolerance kept homosexuality out of the broader discussion of piracy and thus, is largely lost to the heterocentric narrative of history. Fortunately for this discourse, French perceptions of sexuality were far more cavalier in their views of homosexuality on land and sea which aides in the retroactive analysis of pirates. Yet, this

³⁶ Miller, "Edouard Corbiere, "Mating," and Maritime Adventure," 311.

³⁷ Miller, "Edouard Corbiere, "Mating," and Maritime Adventure," 320.

burgeoning tolerance was not observed in the earlier years of piracy and while it hints at a larger culture of sexual promiscuity and same-sex relationships among buccaneers, the evidence is merely circumstantial and further shows that homosexual contact was not standard practice. The later revelations of homosexual activity among pirates lends to the conclusion that pirates had incredibly complex relationships with one another that may have included homosexual contact, homosexuality, and sodomy but these features were relegated to a subculture of piracy that existed quietly within the dominant culture. Regardless, men found comfort in one another both as a matter of circumstance and by their own choice to share a life of piracy together. The volatile nature of their work and the homosocial environment of a pirate ship allowed them to negotiate deeply personal — and sometimes sexual— bonds between men.

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